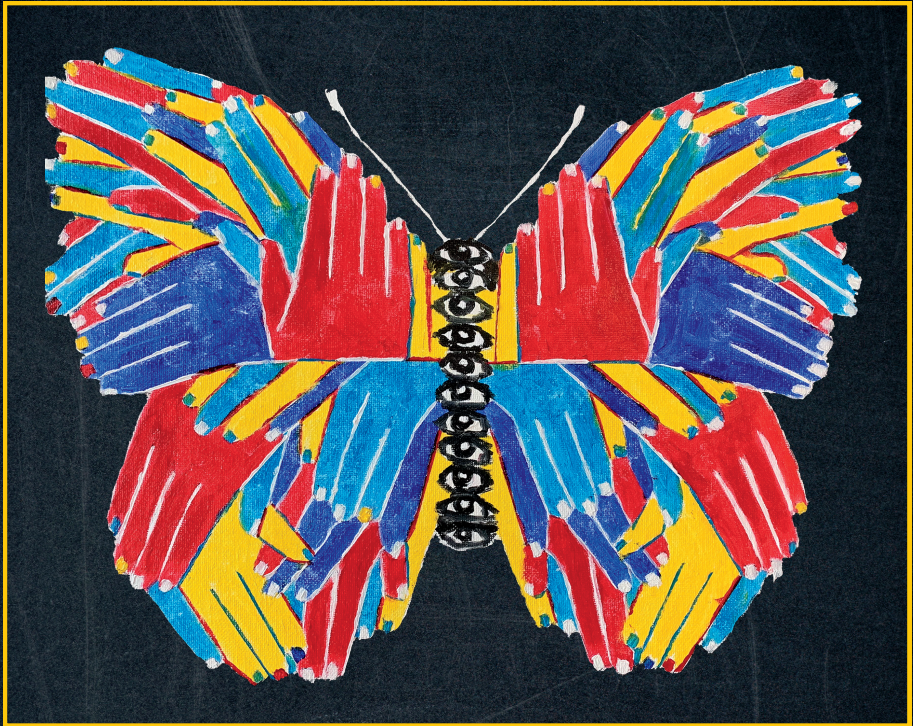


The Butterfly Cage



Joy, heartache, and corruption:
Teaching while Deaf in a California public school.

A memoir by

Rachel Zemach

THE BUTTERFLY CAGE

Joy, Heartache, and Corruption:
Teaching while Deaf
in a California Public School

RACHEL ZEMACH

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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THE WORLD IN A CUP

“Once Deaf-centered concepts are accepted, the whole basis for colonialism [of the Deaf] is overthrown.”

Paddy Ladd

MOST OF MY STUDENTS rode a yellow bus to and from school. Sometimes, after they boarded it, I got on it, too. I’d check in with the bus drivers about how things were going and teach them a bit of sign language. One day, the driver told me that the day before, a substitute driver had been there and when he couldn’t find a student’s address in the system, it hadn’t gone well.

“These kids don’t know their own addresses!” the driver said exasperatedly.

“Maybe the student didn’t understand the question?” I said, since I had a very hard time understanding him myself.

“Nah, the other driver told me he said it really loud. And another girl helped translate. But still, all your student said was green.” The driver shook his head grimly. The sub had called the dispatcher, and the dispatcher tried to contact the parent, but there was no record of a student living on a Green Street.

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Somehow, they'd resolved the situation, however the driver was clearly upset, and I promised I'd address the address problem immediately.

The larger issue of communication between the drivers and the Deaf students was harder to resolve. But it was far from impossible. I often wished the drivers, and the school staff, were either mandated, incentivized, or strongly encouraged by the administration to learn some sign language. Learning a basic, working vocabulary in ASL requires effort, but increasingly there are options for online learning, and if required to, one can master a decent vocabulary fairly easily. Instructional videos pertaining separately to drivers, teachers, lunch supervisors, etc, say, with five basic sentences per lesson for people to study at their convenience, could easily be made. The drivers could practice while waiting to pick up the students, and—had it been part of the school culture—staff could help teach and practice with each other. It would have to be nationally endorsed, and pushed strongly by administrators. But the administrators usually didn't sign, themselves. The oft-promoted idea that the kids should wear devices to hear better and learn to speak and blend in with their hearing peers reduced the urgency to sign even more. Parents too were given an ambivalent, mixed or nonexistent message about learning to sign.

But this engenders students who don't know their address, or basic vocabulary.

The next morning, I asked Maria where she lived. "Green," she said.

"The street you live on is named Green?"

"No."

"Is it green there, with a lot of grass?"

"No." Maria looked befuddled.

"Is your house green?" At this I saw I was getting warmer, but not quite there yet. Most of my students lived in apartment buildings, not houses, so I pantomimed a big building divided up into smaller compartments and asked if it was green. Bingo! She nodded.

"Okay, so it's an apartment building, and it's green. Like this book is green!" I said, pointing to a book. But Maria shook her head adamantly. At this point Lemarcus jumped into the conversation.

"It's green but..." and he dashed off to find something light green.

"Oh, I get it, it's light green. But what's the name of the street?" I asked.

"Light Green?"

"No," I tried again. "That's the color of the building. The name of the street is different. Do you know the name of the street?"

"Different Street?" Maria ventured.

"Um, no." I said, aware that I'd just told her it was different.

"I know!" Lemarcus chimed in. He'd brought a green folder and slapped it on the table.

"It's not different, her street name is SAME! Same Street!" We'd been working on opposites.

"Those are opposites, yeah. Different and same. But that's not her street name."

"Oh, I know! I know! They're not the same. Because it's a light green! Whereas this folder is dark green. So, it's different!"

By now I was getting quite confused myself.



The next day I prepared a poster-sized "write-up" of text for the students to read.

"Where are we now?" I pointed to the first sentence and read. "What city are we in?"

Vanessa Dae answered:

"Bridgestone school!"

"Yes, but I mean what city?"

"School city." Uxmal replied.

"No, what city is this?" I gestured with my arms, eyes casting a wide net visually. The sign for city involves the making of a few rooftops. The kids looked unsure, but Ansharah got excited.

"Oh, I know! It's room 42 Bridgestone School City!" she said. Uxmal turned and thanked her.

"No," I said. "I mean, yes. You're right, this classroom is room 42. And yes, we're in Bridgestone school. But the school has a name, the street has a name, and the city has a name too. They're all different." Lemarcus's face lit up in recognition.

"I told you!"

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“No, no... Okay, look. We’re in a room.” I made four walls like a box with my hands. “The room is in a school.” “The school is on a street.” I pointed to the street outside. “The street is in a city. The city is in a state.” With each delineation, my arms and glance got bigger. “The state is in a country. And everything is in the world! You know world, right?” My students looked at me as if I was unnecessarily complicating things. Lazlo had moved to the upper grade class now, and suddenly I missed him. He’d love all these new words, and his interest would be contagious.

“Okay so this is the world!” I began again, for some reason deciding that reversing the concept might help. I spread my arms so wide they felt like they’d snap off and widened my eyes to show a huge scope of area. The students looked at me with some concern. Then I brought my arms in a bit, to show a country, and then again for state and so on.

“So, there’s the world, then a country, then a state, that’s divided up into cities, and in our city, there are streets, and on one street there’s a school, and in that is room number 42, and inside that room is us!” I was pleased with myself. But by then the students had zoned out. To my surprise, they sat, heads tilted and eyes glazed over like zombies. It was remarkable what a good sedative a little geography could be.

I gave them a ten-minute play break outside. It was around 2007 at the time; I could have shown them maps on the internet, but the classroom wasn’t set up for it, and neither was I. Perhaps to their detriment, I was an extremely low-tech teacher. When my class came back inside, they were sweaty and refreshed, and looked at me with renewed interest now that I held a marker in my hand. It’s funny how even the smallest gadgets can be game changers. When the students were all seated around the standing whiteboard, I started drawing.

“Okay, so, we’re in room 42, in a school, on a street named Fairbolt Street.” I drew concentric blobs and labeled them, along with little lines for streets.

“I live on another street, called Corbell Street. Who can tell me what street they live on?” I looked pointedly at the aides, but Oscar jumped in.

“I live on family street,” said Oscar.

“Tan house on the corner street.” Jabari added, smiling as he thought about his home.

“A-Woman-Sits-There-Everyday Street.” Antonio said. A few students agreed, for they’d seen the woman daily too, from the bus windows.

“Mine is Green-Building Divided-up-into-compartments Street,” said Maria.

“No, remember, it’s Light Green Building Street,” Lemarcus said.

“Okay. Thanks everyone. You’re not wrong, but the address is a little different. Look! I wrote down all your addresses.” I gave them each a large index card with their address written on it. The kids eagerly began fingerspelling all the words. I tried to get their attention, but they were unstoppable, so, to their dismay, I took the cards back.

“Look, I’ll give these back in a minute,” I signed, and put the cards down behind me. The students looked forlorn, as if I’d just taken their actual homes away.

“I promise. But first, look. You live in an apartment, or house, with a number on it. It’s on a street, in a city, in a state, in a country, in the world. It’s like the world is divided up. Small to bigger and bigger and bigger areas, each one with a name.” I turned around to draw each part, in-between my explanation. Suddenly the students screamed. “They get it!” I thought, delighted. Until I saw what they were screaming about. I’d accidentally made a mark that went outside the world territory, and clear into the universe. And I’d used a permanent marker. My class was so scandalized by the one-inch mark that I sighed and gave up on the lecture. I gave them their index cards instead, along with directions to the aides, and they dispersed to learn their addresses.

The next day I tried another method. This one worked well. I’d gone to Target the evening before and bought as many sizes of paper cups as I could find. Using them, I made sets of cups that fit into each other, like wooden Russian Babushka dolls. I labeled the first set in front of the class, using a black marker to write the word home on the smallest cup, street on the next, then city, state, and country on the others. Luckily, I’d found some big, red cups in the staff room, left over from a party, so we also had a world. After labeling their own

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sets, the students put the cups inside each other, and then removed them, reading the words and memorizing the order. I paired the younger with older students and they practiced, grinningly, the older students ordering the younger ones to put their street, city, state and other cups in order, bossily, as if they'd known the words for more than a day themselves.

Once they knew their addresses, I told them to demonstrate to their parents. The parents had taught their other, hearing children their addresses, I guessed, and I wanted them to see their Deaf kids could learn them, too. Often, the assumption is Deaf kids are limited in what they can—or should be expected—to do. My student's intelligence was unassailable. They were between the ages of six and eleven the year I taught them their addresses. But their exposure to vocabulary was limited. If everyone in their lives—from their parents to the bus drivers to the principal—had a working knowledge of ASL, teaching those words and concepts would have been unnecessary.

In only two days, the students had their addresses memorized, they'd nailed the cup sequence and they could imitate my rather manic-looking description of an expanding eagle-eyed view of a location. Next, I copied a wonderful project Emily's Kindergarten teacher had done, and had my class make booklets. They drew their homes on the cover, their street on the first page, and so on. On the last page they drew a globe of the world. Antonio drew a lumpy woman outside his apartment, which earned him hearty claps on the back, and there, on the cover of Maria's booklet, was a light green apartment building. It had a little street sign in front of it, the words Hopkins Street perfectly configured to fit it.

Now all I had to do was teach the bus driver to sign the question, "Where do you live?" and tell the students that while they should tell the driver, they should not share their address with everyone else they saw, which they were absolutely raring to do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Zemach was hearing for half her childhood and Deaf the other half, after an accident left her Deaf at age ten. But it wasn't until much later, over a ten year period when she taught a Deaf class in a hearing, public school, that she began to identify as Deaf-with-a-capital-D. Incidents occurring in her classroom and in her interactions with the hearing administration and staff were often absurd, comedic and at times, shocking. The students were language-hungry, wonderful and smart. They—and their sometimes surprising journeys, particularly one boy whose story turned tragic—provided the fire and impetus for this book.